

THE FIRST FATHERS OF THE “MOTHER CHURCH” OF THE SOUTH HILLS

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Founded by the Passionist¹ Fathers in 1889 as a mission springing from St. Michael Church on Pittsburgh's South Side, St. Anne Church in Castle Shannon is often referred to as the “mother church” of the South Hills. In the publication celebrating St. Anne's one hundredth anniversary (1989), Monsignor Charles Owen Rice, a former pastor (1976-1986), wrote: “For Catholics, St. Anne is the mother parish of the whole South Hills: Mount Lebanon, Bethel Park, Whitehall, Castle Shannon.”²

St. Anne's entitlement to that designation rests on the fact that it was the lone Catholic parish in the large territory³ from 1889 until St. Bernard was established in Mt. Lebanon (1919), St. Valentine in Bethel Park (1931), St. Germaine in Bethel Park and St. Gabriel of the Sorrowful Virgin in Whitehall (both in 1957), and St. Winifred in Mt. Lebanon (1960).

Passionist Roots

While the roots of the parish are found in 1889, its seed is located even deeper into the nineteenth century with the events that brought the first Passionists from Europe to America. “How the Passionists came to America is a simple story,” wrote Passionist Father Cassian J. Yuhaus in *Compelled to Speak*, his history of the order in America published in 1967:

There were no involved negotiations. No prolonged discussions. No tedious exchange of letters. A request was made. Refused. Renewed. Granted. Three priests and a brother knelt for the ‘benedicite’ and

then quietly walked down Coelian Hill on their way to the New World. That it was accomplished with such simplicity, so free of impediment or obstacle, was due to one man, the first benefactor of the Order in America, Michael O'Connor, Bishop of Pittsburgh.⁴

O'Connor, the first bishop of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, and Father Anthony Testa, superior general of the order, signed the agreement in Rome on September 28, 1852.

The initial group of four Passionists selected by Testa to travel to America included Father Anthony Calandri, Father Albinus Magno, Father Stanislaus Parczyk, and Brother Lawrence di Giacomo. They arrived in Pittsburgh accompanied by Bishop O'Connor who had arranged to travel with them on his return from Europe,⁵ and soon began travelling to offer Mass and celebrate the Sacraments with Catholics living in communities throughout the diocese.

By the time the first Mass was offered in Castle Shannon, 37 years had passed and three of the four immigrant Passionists had died – di Giacomina (1865), Calandri (1878) and Magno (1887). Parczyk died in 1892. Their legacy was great, and their many achievements included assumption of care of St. Michael's, construction of St. Paul of the Cross Monastery, attraction of many new vocations, holding retreats for clergy, pioneering retreats for the laity, preaching parish missions, and generally fostering the growth of Catholicism in the Pittsburgh region.



The Opfermans

Source: Saint Anne Parish Archives



Opferman House 1912

Source: Saint Anne Parish Archives



The Opferman House Chapel

Source: Saint Anne Parish Archives

of St. Anne, Rice referenced the then-predominant ethnic heritage of Castle Shannon by:

The German farmers who were the backbone of the early St. Ann (the first spelling) made contact with the German Passionist priests who were serving St. Michael's on the South Side.

Joseph Opferman, whose father came from the old country, had a large place up on Connor Road and was a take charge type. On September 15, 1889 the first Mass in St. Anne Parish was offered by Father Bernard Hehl, C.P. in a little makeshift chapel set up in Joseph's home.⁶

The priests would repeatedly navigate the seven miles from Pittsburgh's South Side to Castle Shannon to celebrate Holy Mass and provide pastoral care, and by 1892 “the congregation was pushing the limits of the Opferman Chapel.”⁷ Bishop Richard Phelan was petitioned and approved the purchase of four acres of land, located at the corner of Railroad Street (now Rockwood Avenue) and Willow Avenue for the sum of \$2,000.⁸

The Very Reverend Boniface Sotter, C.P., rector of St. Paul Monastery, along with Father Anselm Clemens, laid the cornerstone of the new church. Bishop Phelan dedicated the new church building to the patronage of good St. Anne, mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary, on May 30, 1892.⁹

The establishment of St. Anne would be left to their spiritual descendants, the four priests who would become the first Fathers of the mother church of the South Hills: Passionist Fathers Bernard Hehl, Bernardine Dusch, Ferdinand Immikus, and Anselm Clemens.

In recalling the founding

Mass had been celebrated once a month in the Opferman home from 1889 until the dedication of the church building when Clemens became the first pastor. From then on, weekly Mass was held there. Under the seven-year tutelage of these “first Fathers” the parish that was to become the “mother church of the South Hills” flourished and was turned over to the care of diocesan priests in July 1896.

Father Bernard Hehl

Father Bernard Hehl (1846-1908), celebrant of the first Mass offered at the parish, was born James Hehl on November 12, 1846, in Heimertingen, Bavaria. He came to the United States as a youngster and entered the Passionist novitiate in Pittsburgh at age 17, professing his vows on March 30, 1864, and receiving the name Bernard of the Five Wounds.

His biographer writes that Hehl “was among the early Professed Religious of the Pittsburgh novitiate, taking his vows in 1864. During the Civil War he remembers Union troops sleeping out on the empty hillside running through the monastery garden down to the property of St. Michael's parish.”¹⁰



Father Bernard Hehl, C.P.

Source: Passionist Biographies, Folder No. 76, Passionist Archives

On December 23, 1869, Hehl was ordained and received his first assignment as pastor of Holy Family Church in Union Hill, New Jersey. Six years later, in 1875 he was transferred to St. Michael in Pittsburgh, where he served as assistant pastor until 1884, when he became pastor, serving until 1898.

According to the Passionist Archives, Hehl was a very busy man. He built a lyceum, a school, and a dwelling for the Brothers of Mary. He organized various societies for men, women, and children. He also organized the diocesan League of Roman Catholic Young Men's Societies, and was made the first grand president of the Federation of German Young Men's Societies in the United States.¹¹

In February of 1898, while in the prime of his life, and in the zenith of his Apostolic zeal for souls, it pleased Almighty God to send him the great affliction of his life – an affliction which was to cut short any further active labor in the ministry. One morning while making his Thanksgiving after Mass he was stricken with paralysis. While he regained some



First St. Anne Church

Source: Diocese of Pittsburgh Archives

physical and speech abilities he never fully regained his health but remained a man steadfast in prayer.¹²

Father Hehl died on All Soul's Day, 1908.

Father Bernardine Dusch

Following the first Mass of 1889 until the completion of the first church building in 1892, Father Hehl and other Passionist priests came monthly to offer Mass in the Opferman home. One of these was Father Bernardine Dusch, who in contemporary terminology might have been considered the parish administrator.¹³

Dusch was a multi-talented, multi-lingual priest as remembered in the Passionist Archives: "Fr. Bernadine was a gifted playwright and artist whose paintings were highly regarded and a zealous missionary who preached sermons in German, Spanish, Italian, and English."¹⁴

Martin Dusch was born March 1, 1859 in Rochester, New York, and attended Catholic schools there until enrolling in Redemptorist College in Ilchester, Maryland. For some un-

known reason, he did not join the Redemptorists but instead applied to the Passionists. He was professed a Passionist in Pittsburgh on December 22, 1878, taking the name Bernardine of Jesus. Dusch was ordained on April 27, 1884, at St. Michael's Monastery in West Hoboken, New Jersey. Following ordination he was assigned as curate to St. Joseph's Monastery Church in Baltimore until 1888 when he was assigned to St. Michael in Pittsburgh for three years.

It was during this time (1888-1891) that he made the frequent trek from South Side to Castle Shannon to offer Holy Mass in the Opferman house chapel. During this time,

...he worked with characteristic zeal and assiduity for three years to whatever duties were assigned him. He helped in the formation of societies, which were roughly organized at that time under the pastorate of Fr. Bernard Hehl. Those societies were regarded as models of imitation in the entire diocese of Pittsburgh and they endured for many decades in their primitive vigor.¹⁵



Father Bernardine Dusch, C.P.

Source: Passionist Biographies, Folder No. 136, Passionist Archives

Thereafter, Dusch received four consecutive out-of-state assignments before returning to Pittsburgh. First, he was sent to Mexico for missionary work (1891-1894); served the order preaching parish missions while being stationed in St. Louis, Louisville, and Kansas (1894-1900); then as pastor of Immaculata Monastery Church in Cincinnati (1901-1904); and finally as pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Union City (1904-1907).

Returning to Pittsburgh in 1907, Dusch served as chaplain to the Passionist Nuns' convent¹⁶ in Carrick during which time he wrote *Veronica's Veil – America's Passion Play*. He served the nuns for ten years (1910-1920): “In the early days of the Passionist Nuns foundation he served not only as chaplain but also as janitor and errand boy. He often spoke of himself as the ‘Outdoor or Extern Sister’. Besides doing a great deal of mechanical odd jobs, he went to the grocer and butcher for them.”¹⁷

Dusch lived his last 24 years in Pittsburgh. His biographer

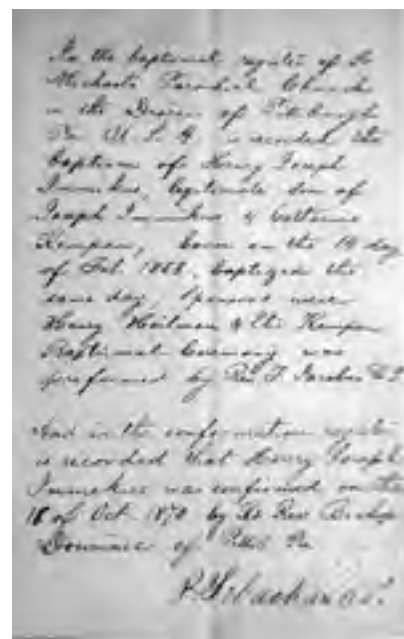
recalls that “Divine Providence had a great deal of good work reserved for him during his 24 years in Pittsburgh. It seems incredible, yet there are many who maintain that he did his best work the last half of his priestly life.”¹⁸

From 1920 until his death in 1931, Dusch served as chaplain of Mercy Hospital, a facility with which he was all too familiar for “owing to his increasing infirmities, especially arthritis and an injured spine, he was sent (there) at various times for treatment.”¹⁹ Father Dusch died at Mercy Hospital on May 28, 1931, at age 72.

Father Ferdinand Immikus

Also offering Holy Mass in the very early days of St. Anne's was a Pittsburgh native, Father Ferdinand Immikus. He was born Henry Joseph Immikus on Pittsburgh's South Side in 1858. Basic biographical information from the Passionist Archives provide an overview of his early years:

He was baptized in St. Michael's parish and began a Christian life that was a reflection both of his religious training received from his saintly parents, and of the zealous and capable Sisters of the parish school. For some years he was employed in tinsmiths work but at the age of 19 he began his novitiate at St. Paul's up on the hill. He professed his vows there but shortly after was sent to Rome to be educated for the priesthood. He was ordained in the Eternal City.²⁰



Letter certifying Baptism and Confirmation of Henry Joseph Immikus

Source: Passionist Biographies, Folder No. 153, Passionist Archives

In further reading of his biography in the Passionist Archives, the dedication and holiness of this priest becomes tangible:

His piety during the celebration of the Mass was such that he seemed to be in ecstasy. The hours he spent in the confessional bore rich fruit. His zeal for preaching the Word of God could be equaled by few; he never ascended the pulpit unprepared; he spoke



Father Ferdinand Immikus

Passionist Biographies, Folder No. 153, Passionist Archives

with unction and deep sincerity. His discourse of the Sufferings of Christ, especially during Lent, revealed the depth of his own gratitude to Christ for His Passion and Death. His devotion to the Mother of God, especially her Sorrows was scarcely surpassed by the greatest saints.²¹

Immikus died on September 8, 1935, exactly 57 years after professing his vows. The Passionist Archives contain the entry:

Fifty-seven years ago, on September 8, 1878, there knelt at the altar of God in St. Paul's Monastery a youth who, filled with the desire of glorifying God and sanctifying himself took the vows of religion in the Passionist Congregation. Fifty-seven years later to the day in 1935 that same youth passed from this vale of tears to receive his heavenly reward.²²

Father Anselm Clemens

With the completion of the first church building in 1892, Father Anselm Clemens became the founding and first pastor of St. Anne Church. He was born in Louisville, Kentucky on January 18, 1863, entered the order in Pittsburgh at age 18 on July 1, 1881 and professed his vows in 1882, taking the name Anselm of the Holy Ghost. Clemens was ordained a priest on October 26, 1890, and worked in sever-

al Passionist parishes including Holy Cross in Cincinnati and St. Michael in Pittsburgh, before founding and serving St. Anne from 1892 to 1896. While serving as pastor of St. Anne he also attended to duties at St. Michael.

Under his leadership a school was opened in the sacristy of the church. It was referred to as *The Sacristy School* and was staffed by a lay person. Fifteen pupils were enrolled.²³ The following year the parish cemetery, adjacent to the church, was blessed on the feast of St. Anne, July 26, 1893. The first person to be buried in the cemetery was Mrs. Louisa Opferman, in whose family farmhouse Holy Mass had first been celebrated.

The next year, 1894, a small schoolhouse was erected. St. Anne's first Holy Communion class numbered 22 children.²⁴ Two years later, on June 15, 1896, Bishop Phelan administered the sacrament of Confirmation to the first class of 69 students.²⁵ On July 11, 1896 the parish was turned over to the care of diocesan priests.²⁶

Clemens lived only to age 37, dying in 1900. "This zealous priest was in the flower of his age and the midst of his usefulness when he was suddenly stricken down with and carried off with the typhoid fever."²⁷



Father Anselm Clemens, C.P.

Source: Passionist Biographies, Folder No. 57, Passionist Archives

At the time of his death in 1900, Clemens was acting pastor of Church of the Immaculata in Cincinnati. When the nature of his malady was discovered, he was removed to nearby Good Samaritan Hospital where “in spite of all that medical skill and the best care could do for him, the disease terminated fatally, September 21st, just three weeks after his admittance into the hospital. He had piously received all the comforts of our holy religion.”²⁸



**Gravestone of Father
Anselm Clemens, St. Agnes
Cemetery, Louisville, KY**

Source: Find A Grave

The Passionist Archives note that “All through life he was remarkable for his uniform gentleness, his untiring zeal, and his earnest piety. Amidst the distractions and dangers of parish work, he was always the faithful priest and true Passionist. He enjoyed the confidence and love of his parishioners and all who knew him.”²⁹

Perhaps the finest accolade cast upon Father Clemens is found in the diamond jubilee booklet of St. Michael parish (1923): “He was the founder of St. Ann’s Church, in Castle Shannon, Pa. His labors in the establishment of this parish were many and arduous. St. Ann’s, Castle Shannon, is therefore a monument to his zeal.”³⁰

The zeal of Father Clemens and his fellow Passionists of over a century ago is still appreciated today as evidenced by a recent decision by the committee steering the pending merger of St. Anne with St. Winifred. The Steering Committee was tasked with submitting three preferred names for the new parish to Pittsburgh Bishop David A. Zubik, and did so on March 22, 2019, including “St. Paul of the Cross Parish” as a recommendation. Two months later, the Diocese of Pittsburgh announced that effective July 1, the merged parish name would be St. Paul of the Cross.³¹

Endnotes:

¹ The Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ commonly referred to as the Passionists (in Latin: *Congregatio Passionis Iesu Christi*) was founded by Saint Paul of the Cross in Italy in 1720 with a special emphasis on the Passion of Jesus Christ. Professed members use the initials C.P. after their names.

² Monsignor Charles Owen Rice, *100 Years, St. Anne R.C. Church, 1889-1989* (Pittsburgh: St. Anne Parish, 1989).

³ The total size today of Castle Shannon, Mt. Lebanon, Bethel Park and

Whitehall is 22.674 square miles according to municipal websites.

⁴ Cassian J. Yuhas, C.P., *Compelled to Speak* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1967), 16.

⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁶ The present address that corresponds to the Opferman home is 20 Oregon Trail, Bethel Park, Pennsylvania.

⁷ Father James Garvey, *Celebrating 125 Years* (Pittsburgh: St. Anne Parish, 2014), 6.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Passionist Archives of St. Paul of the Cross Province, University of Scranton, Weinberg Memorial Library, Special Collections, Passionist Biographies, Folder No. 76 (hereinafter cited as Passionist Archives).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See “St. Anne’s Pastors 1889-1989” in *100 Years*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Passionist Archives, Folder No. 136.

¹⁶ In the year 1910, five Passionist nuns arrived from Italy and lived for two months in St. Joseph’s Convent across from St. Michael’s Rectory, at which place Father Dusch at that time resided.

¹⁷ Passionist Archives, Folder No. 136.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Passionist Archives, Folder No. 153.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Garvey, 7.

²⁴ Dedication Booklet, *St. Anne R.C. Church, April 14, 1963* (Pittsburgh: St. Anne Parish, 1963).

²⁵ Garvey, *Celebrating*, 7.

²⁶ A few weeks before this transfer Father Clemens was assigned to St. Joseph’s Monastery in Baltimore and Father Sebastian Stutts was appointed pastor of St. Anne for the brief interval.

²⁷ Passionist Archives, *Necrologia Book* for years 1881-1888, 1897-1901, and 1905.

²⁸ Passionist Archives, Obituary Folder No. 57.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ *A Story of 75 years: Diamond Jubilee Booklet of St. Michael’s Parish, Pittsburgh, Pa. 1848-1923* (Pittsburgh: St. Michael Parish, 1923), 36-37.

³¹ “Bishop Zubik announces five parish mergers,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 19, 2019, C-1.